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The Anti-Corruption Struggle in Xi Jinping's China: An Alternative Political Narrative

Kerry Brown

The fact that the extensive anti-corruption struggle that has consumed China since 2013 is highly political is widely accepted and understood. But the question is precisely what political strategy it is directed at – that of bolstering the position of the current supreme leader, Xi Jinping. Or for the preservation of the Party itself. There is a huge difference between these. The first simply means in effect the replacement of one corruptible elite by another. The second means a titanic struggle to change the Chinese communist party culture of power, and to make it enduring and sustainable.

Corruption in China is not a new issue. Since the reform era began from 1978, the economic opportunities that have opened up have offered constant temptation to Party officials. The 1980s saw the first signs of a new kind of collateral collusion, where state enterprises and state assets were used for vested interests linked to networks in the Party state. Lack of rule of law, transparency and accountability only aggravated a situation where marketization was leading to high levels of growth and wealth creation. One of the principle causes of the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising was corruption. But dealing with the aftermath of 1989 and trying to correct some of the issues that had led to it happening did not solve the problem of corruption. In some ways, things only got worse. In the 1990s and into the 2000s, as China's socialist market economy saw continuously rising growth, and the development of non-state players who had to still work closely with government officials, things deteriorated.

According to scholars like Andrew Wedeman, the systemic causes of corruption in China – the ways in which Party officials were able to monetarize their positions to bring illicit and direct gain for their family and other private networks - was an almost endemic problem. With the Communist Party literally above the law, and no other means of holding it accountable beyond lax self-governance, the problems arising from it trying to be its own judge and jury were legion. Strike hard campaigns throughout the last four decades only put a temporary halt on things – but did nothing to address the fundamental problem. They were, as Wedeman points out, simply trying to curb the very worst excesses. They were not aimed at fundamentally addressing the systemic causes of the issue.¹

Nor is it the case that the current leaders of China are not highly aware of how problematic and corrosive this issue is. When speaking as the Party Secretary on the first day of his elevation in November 2012, Xi Jinping explicitly mentioned the ways in which the Party had lost touch with people. 'In the new situation,' he stated, 'our party faces many severe challenges, and there are many pressing problems within the party that need to be resolved, especially problems such as corruption and bribe-taking by some party members and cadres, being out of touch with the people, placing undue emphasis on formality and bureaucracy'.² True to his word, it was soon clear that fighting corruption was going to be one of the signature themes of his era.

¹ Andrew Wedeman, 'Double Paradox: Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China', Cornell University Press, 2012

² BBC: Full Text: China's New Party Chief Xi Jinping's speech: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-20338586> accessed 3rd April 2017

What was less expected was how long, and drawn out, this struggle would be. From 2012 to 2016, over 100,000 officials at various levels have been charged in the campaign for corruption. For economic crimes, there were 9 per cent increases annually in 2013, and 10 per cent the following year. What was most impressive however was the ways in which senior officials at the lower levels of government up were targeted. There was a 46 per cent increase in 2013, with a staggering 126 per cent the following year, and 27 per cent in 2015. In 2012, 179 senior level officials were indicted. By 2015, this had shot up to 747. No one seemed to be immune. Even a former politburo member standing committee member, Zhou Yongkang, was been indicted and imprisoned – the first time since 1949 someone at this level has been so treated. Bo Xilai, General Xu Caihou and Ling Jihua, from the Politburo, were also taken in.³

While many have understood the administrative impact of the current struggle, interpreting the political meaning of this extensive campaign however has proved problematic. This arises from the relationship the campaign has to Xi Jinping as the supreme elite leader, and to the Communist Party as an organisation. The two are very closely related – but the ambiguity is really about confusion over the ways in which the anti-corruption struggle can be seen as serving Xi's direct political interests, or whether in fact it is part of a more profound movement by the Party itself to try to strengthen its internal institutions and becoming sustainable.

We know that even before Xi formally took up the main Party position, anti-corruption drives were already featuring in the elite leadership's minds. The highly regarded, formidable economist Wang Qishan, a man who had skilfully guided the US China Strategic dialogue for a number of years, was appointed head of the Central Discipline and Inspection Commission, the Party's dreaded anti-corruption enforcer, in the autumn of 2012, before the full leadership changes 18th Party Congress.⁴ This indicated a cross-generational commitment in the Party elite that the problems arising from years of solid growth, and the role of the Party in delivering that, needed to be addressed.

Looking into Xi Jinping's background, we may not find searching, powerful declarations of ideological commitment towards Marxism Leninism. He is, like Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong, no theorist. He is a practicing politician. Ideas have to have use and utility. They are there to serve a function. Of all the consistent and most coherent ideas he has been associated with, however, there is one that reaches back to his time in Fujian province in the south east of China, where he was an official for over 16 years from 1985 to 2001. In 1991, during an interview with Xinhua, he stated that cadres needed simply to manage government and do political work. They needed to leave business and making money to the entrepreneurs and state enterprise managers. They needed to see their function as delivering a political strategy, not a commercial one.

Of course, however simple it may have sounded, there was a fundamental problem with this. Party figures, with their modest wages and relatively small perks, were living in a society where each day they saw contracts they were awarding or projects they had granting the go ahead to creating vast amounts of wealth, often for the newly emerging entrepreneurial class. To add insult to injury, many of these were people who had left government service in order to do business. As ideological commitment and the idealistic mission of the Party to create a strong, rich, socialist country faded, so too did the barriers to temptation. In the 1990s and into the 2000s, those visiting China would have

³ Statistics from Andrew Wedeman, 'Four Years On, Where is Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Drive Headed', China Policy Institute Analysis, <https://cpianalysis.org/2016/09/19/four-years-on-where-is-xi-jinpings-anti-corruption-drive-headed/>, accessed 3rd April 2017

⁴ Wang however did not formally take up his position until 15th November 2012.

been hard pressed to tell entrepreneurs and business people apart from government figures. The two seemed to have melded into one.

Chinese author Wang Xiaofang in his novel 'The Civil Servant's Notebook', published in the era just before the Xi anti-corruption struggle started, writes of this period of seemingly unstoppable cadre enrichment and the dense collusion between party and non party networks as each fed off the other.⁵ Lack of any restraint from rule of law and a judiciary independent of the political system, plus phenomenal growth led to a position where the Communist Party became like a mega-successful business organisation so intimately was it connected with business growth. It was on this model that Richard McGregor described it in his influential 2009 book, 'The Party'.⁶ Policies it sponsored led, for instance, to the breakneck construction of the world's most extensive high speed rail network. The embezzlement of billions of RMB from this alone led to the felling of the railway minister in 2011. There was plenty of high volume pilfering going on at the same time from construction, finance, telecoms – practically any sector where there was heavy state involvement.

Putting Politics Back in Control

That Xi Jinping was associated with the reinvigoration of the idea that the Party was first and foremost a political entity was perhaps part of the reason for his final successful elevation. It was on the basis of an idea, this idea, rather than him as a person or his background, that saw his success. The fact was that he had largely observed the rule that politics had to take command, and that the Party needed to be placed only in a political space, not a quasi-commercial one. And for this reason, he was a surprisingly isolated politician.

There was however an intellectual issue here. Since the reform and opening up, the Party had added to its two main pillars of legitimacy (unifying the country, and winning as part of the United Front the war against the Japanese) that of stimulating wealth creation and growth. Delivery of tangible economic results had been the key benchmark by which leaders had demonstrated their rights to rule over the 1980s and into the new century. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao at successive Party congresses had made this crystal clear. With no solid growth, the Party was vulnerable. Faith in Marxism Leninism was a thing of the past. China is a society run along capitalist lines now, driven by profit, deals and wealth creation. With its ideological foundation so exposed and vulnerable to the attack that it was simply empty rhetoric, how could the Party preserve its monopoly on power and not simply go down the same disastrous route as that of the USSR and others, where sister political organisations had vanished? Why not just call it a day and rebrand itself a social democratic entity in charge of a mixed economy, travelling the sort of route towards partial democratization Taiwan had taken in the 1980s?

The answer to why this didn't happen was a simple one. Despite appearances, socialist ideology, albeit with Chinese characteristics (whatever that might have meant in the end – people seemed to operate from very different models) never went away. And economic growth as a pillar of legitimacy was always an expediency for the Party, a means to an end – it was never the end itself. In formal terms the aim of all the partial marketisation going on in China from 1978 onwards was simply to create the primary state of socialism. Achieving socialism as an overall aim never disappeared. And while Marx may have predicted the revolution coming first of all to developed, industrialised economies, what the Chinese were doing, particularly since 1978, was making sure they could accelerate this process in their country, industrialise, build the right foundation, and then achieve socialism before anyone else.

⁵ Wang Xiaofang, 'The Civil Servant's Notebook', Penguin China, 2012

⁶ Richard McGregor, 'The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers', Allen Lane, London, 2010.

That underlying teleology propelling history and development in China (or, putting it uncharitably, myth) is part of the mindset of elite Party leaders like Xi. It informs their speeches and operates as a shadowy background to almost everything they say. It figures as a grand assumption or article of faith much like the idea in America for instance that if someone works hard and strives they will be successful because the world is a just place, or the notion in Europe that all people are equal and there is an intrinsic moral order governing things. Under Hu Jintao, the catchphrase may well have been 'scientific development'. And the Party, with its homogenous leadership definitely came across in Frank Pieke's words as a meritocratic organisation run by technocrats, doing its government business in increasingly functional, tangible ways.⁷ But all of this was still driven by something that looks like it contained an element of faith – that socialism will bring about modernity in China, and that 'the China Dream', in Xi's words, will be a China which is industrialised, modernised, one which will buck the trend of the Chinese past and not be beset by the fragmentations of its myriads of networks but held together by the unifying Party – and unifying because of its adherence to the simple message of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

The Party's political vision and political function therefore are crucial things, essential to its identity and destiny. They are not optional add-ons that can be jettisoned when the right time comes. Because of this essential link between a consensus led ideological world view and the Party's fundamental mission, how could anything be fulfilled when officials violated this – when they degraded their positions by becoming servants of vested interest, local networks and short term, unsustainable, stolen profits? Reports in Bloomberg and the New York Times over 2012 in the lead up to the 18th Party Congress a year later showed how bad things had got. Figures not of tens or hundreds of millions, but billions of dollars of stolen cash were associated with the groups around premier Wen Jiabao. Even Xi's family were connected with expensive property in Hong Kong.⁸ Great granddaughter of the founding father of the regime Mao Zedong, Kong Dongmei, became China's 242nd richest person according to one list issued in 2013. The impact on the moral image of Party officials and their standing in society was huge. Trust surveys showed that local and national politicians were regarded with disdain.⁹ Perceptions of corruption underlined the ways in which there was, in Xi's words quoted earlier, a division between the Party and the people, and that the Party was the ultimate network of vested interest in China. It had come to look like a 'mountain hold' as the domestic discourse put it, a state within a state, parasitical on the world around it, and serving its own, not the greater society's interests.

Moral Reboot – Going for Loyalty.

Of the many policy pronouncements made in the era since Xi came to power, from the raft of ideas at the 3rd Party Plenum in 2013, to those around legal reform a year later at the 4th Plenum, and the ideas in the 13th Five Year Programme running from 2016, the striking commonality is the ways in which the defence of the Party as a political organisation, and the priority being placed on making its monopoly on power sustainable, have become the core missions across all areas of policy, domestic and though less overtly, internationally. The articulation of grand goals like the delivery of the first Centennial Goal in 2021 when the Party celebrates its hundredth year in existence, and that of 2049, when the

⁷ Something Pieke himself described as founding father Mao Zedong's worst nightmare – see Frank Pieke, 'The Good Cadre', Cambridge University Press, 2009, p 2.

⁸ Malcolm Moore, 'China's Incoming President Xi Jinping's family 'has Wealth in Hundreds of Millions'', Daily Telegraph, 29 July 2012, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9365099/Chinas-incoming-president-Xi-Jinpings-family-has-wealth-of-hundreds-of-millions.html>, accessed 4th April 2017

⁹ See Bruce Dickson, 'The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival', Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, p 142

Peoples Republic of China (PRC) becomes a centurion, offer the grand outer garments adorning an all-encompassing political mission – ensuring the Party, with its unity, its consensus-driven vision, and its rational view of the world, prevails over evil forces both from within and outside China. This explains the huge efforts being put into attacking western universalism within the PRC, and forcefully promoting the message in the outside world that the One Party system and China are one thing, and that there will be no tolerance for outsiders trying to play with this, or denigrate or challenge it.

In this context, it is odd therefore that a lot of discussion of the anti-corruption struggle focusses on the ways in which it delivers power and influence to specific Party factions, and in particular to those broadly assembled around Xi. In this interpretation, it has been a means of removing political threats and sources of opposition to him, as the dominant leader. Figures like Ling Jihua, for instance, the right hand man of former party leader Hu Jintao, or the fractious sons and daughters of former high level leaders. The cause celebre of this framework is Bo Xilai, charismatic, innovative as a local leader, highly ambitious, and someone who would have offered a real source of alternative ideas and power to Xi had he not been felled early in 2012 because of the involvement of his wife in the murder of a British businessman.

The campaign probably has been very useful as a means of clearing away potential, or real, opponents to Xi's mission – only it is not clear if he has a mission separate from the Party. Seeing things tightly related to a single political figure and their ambitions is a lower level and not particularly enlightening framework to see the whole vast campaign in. It doesn't explain why there has not been a backlash, nor does it explain it has been so long and extensive. Viewing the struggle as a political instrument for forging a new Party identity and morality has more explanatory power and explains why the collusion and buy in to the campaign has been so prolonged. It is, in effect, serving as a controlled 'intra Party' Cultural Revolution – a cleansing of the ranks and a reminder, sometimes very brutally, that Party officials, in Xi's words, 'do politics, not business' – it is in defence of this principle that the campaign has been waged. Its dominant function is to ensure that the primacy of the political vision and role of the Party is back in the forefront, and that its members have a crystal clear understanding of this.

Equity and Efficiency

As evidence of this, we have to look at the ways in which, for instance, and people at the very heart of the anti-corruption struggle conceptualise their work. Speaking to a group of western scholars in 2015, Wang Qishan, the chief enforcer, made it clear that there were two huge structural issues the struggle was trying to address. The first was inequity. The second was inefficiency. Chinese society since the 2000s, he said, had become increasingly unequal. The resentments at this had reached deep into society. Contentiousness had risen. There were surveys the Party did which found just how deep anger at officials and their privileges and backroom deals had become. Associated with this was real inefficiencies in the ways that official malfeasance and collusion with the wrong networks was producing. With falling GDP growth and tighter economic conditions, and trying to navigate the treacherous period where the middle income trap stood threateningly before the country, the Party needed all the social and public support it could get. Its leading figures could not, in this context, be seen as sources of problems, squandering its precious financial and political capital for their own ends. They had to return to the very idealistic image they had of themselves in works from the early history of the Communist Movement – former leader Liu Shaoqi's 'How to Be a Good Communist' for instance, issued in the 1940s. They needed to show they were part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Strategically, there was also an awareness that if every corrupt official were to be taken in, the country would pretty soon have no one left to run it. There was a clear use therefore of techniques of arbitrary arrest, shock and awe local investigation tours, and the simple creation of uncertainty and fear at all

levels of the officialdom so that, at the very least, they curbed their more excessive behaviour, became more careful, and at least paused for thought before getting too immersed in illicit business. Attempts to give more clarity to commercial law were introduced in 2014 at the plenum that year. Court funding was reviewed so that money did not come from the same level of government but from elsewhere. Regulations and rules which had previously been unwritten and assumed started to be codified – with the Non-Government Organisation law of 2016 in particular causing consternation, but only spelling out what was already widespread practice.

In addition to this, there was a clear understanding that at the very top of the Party, where leadership was so important, and where a key instrument of Party control was still power of appointment, there needed to be no ambiguity or doubts about where the line was between business and politics. People were not there, as Zhou Yongkang or Bo Xilai had been (or so it was claimed in the official accusations against them), to feather the nest of their networks and enrich them. They were there to serve the corporate interests of the Party. For this group, therefore, the strengthening of loyalty through heavy ideological training, through enforcement of loyalty tests and through use of highly publicised symbolic cases to show that no one is safe has been highly effective. As with the adherence to Confucian style rituals to manage and change imperfect behaviour, the new Communist Confucianists created incentives, punishments, and regimes to discipline officials. Loyalty for senior cadres, who might number no more than 3000 in the whole system, and members of the People's Liberation Army, was not requested as an optional, but absolutely demanded. For other groups in society, the Xi leadership has calibrated its message. Media people have been told, in Xi's visit to CCTV in early 2016, to be 'responsible'. The great middle class, emerging in the cities and in the services and consumption sector, who are so key to China's future economic growth, have been appealed to through nationalistic message – tying the sustainability of the Party to the delivery of a rich, strong nation which they so ardently wish to see created.

Critics of the anti-corruption campaign have pointed out that were the Party to really wish to deal with the issue it would need to make fundamental structural changes, introducing proper divisions of responsibility, greater openness and accountability, and allowing the judiciary to hold the executive to account.¹⁰ None of this has happened in China. On the contrary the primacy of the Party has never looked stronger and more stark. This alone proves that the anti-corruption struggle has a predominantly political function, but one that is deeper than simply ensuring Xi's hold on power. It is, in fact, a fundamental tool to deliver one Party sustainable rule. The question is whether, in the long term, it will work. There is a simple reason why the struggle has been so fierce and so prolonged. It is a fight for the very soul of the Party, and one that ranges far beyond the figure of Xi. If it succeeds, then a fundamental part of this mandate – to create sustainable one party rule – will be in his and the Party's grasp. If it fails, then the Party is vulnerable to the sort of implosion that overwhelmed the Soviet Union and others. Its dream, a Party dream, perhaps even a national dream – will have failed. The stakes are that high and range far beyond the appetites and desire for power of one man.

¹⁰ Mingxin Pai is the most eloquent of these. See 'China's Crony Capitalism' Harvard University Press, Camb, Mass, 2017.